Report on Focus Groups:
National Private Sector Summer Jobs Campaign

February 1998

**Prepared by Coffey Communications, LLC
for
Office of Job Training Programs
Employment and Training Administration
U.S. Department of Labor**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

Background/Overview

The Employment and Training Administration (ETA) of the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) administers the nation's largest effort to provide summer jobs and educational development activities for disadvantaged youth, under Title IIB of the Job Training Partnership Act. The Summer Youth Employment and Training Program funds public sector summer job opportunities and educational activities for hundreds of thousands of young people ages 14-21 in communities across the nation.

Even so, today there are more than two eligible young people for every public sector opportunity provided by government. This problem grew more acute in 1996 when funding for the IIB effort was cut by 25 percent from the 1995 level. At the same time, the nation's employers report that their need for skilled workers is greater than it has ever been, and they expect that need only to intensify in the years ahead. Seeking to forge new opportunities from this convergence of public and private sector needs, ETA has initiated a long-term effort to expand the participation of the private sector in providing summer employment opportunities for youth. By extending summer jobs to young people, say private sector leaders who have already done so, employers can make a crucial investment in the future – of their companies, of their communities, and of tomorrow's adults.

As a first step in building this new private sector effort, ETA prepared a study of local initiatives across the country that community leaders identified as doing an exemplary job of providing private sector summer work experiences and training for young people. Published in March 1997, the "Casebook of Private Sector Summer Youth Employment Programs" provides detailed descriptions of 19 successful local efforts and identified, the key structural and logistical elements they have in common. A second ETA document -- "The Summer Employment Resource Guide: Involving the Private Sector" -- offers summer-jobs program operators descriptive information and samples of local materials on the range of organizational activities involved in developing private sector job opportunities and building a solid program structure.

The following report presents additional guidance from discussions that ETA has initiated with both local program operators and private employers to gather useful information about how to expand private sector participation in summer jobs programs for youth. The focus group discussions reflect the recognition that the ideas of both employers and program operators are vital to improving the number and quality of summer job opportunities for young Americans.

DOL will use this information to assist in the development of the overall strategy for the 1998 National Private Sector Summer Jobs Campaign and to provide guidance to states in the Summer Youth Employment and Training Programs.

Executive Summary

In September 1997, the U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) Office of Job Training Programs, Employment and Training Administration, sponsored focus groups in Chicago, Ill. (September 11), Charlotte, N.C. (September 18), and Phoenix, Ariz. (September 25), to elicit the views of service delivery area (SDA) providers and employers about private sector summer jobs programs for young people. Two half-day focus groups were held in each city, with a session for program operators in the morning and another for private sector employers in the afternoon. All of the sessions were facilitated by Coffey Communications, LLC, of Bethesda, Md.

In the Charlotte and Phoenix focus groups, both program operators and employers came from within the state. Participants at the Chicago sessions came from Indiana, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin as well as from Illinois.

The purpose of the focus group discussions was to generate comments and ideas on how to improve the Private Sector Summer Jobs Program and to identify problems that need to be corrected, so that DOL, local program operators, and the private sector can better work together to move the national effort forward. Local program operators and employers were targeted as participants because their perspectives are crucial to improved program planning. The employers and SDA program operators met separately so that members of each group would feel free to discuss their common interests and concerns, and to share information and ideas with their peers.

To further encourage the free flow of ideas, speakers were guaranteed anonymity.

Discussion Highlights: Employers

Employers in all three focus groups characterized their experience with local private sector summer jobs programs as a good one. A Chicago employer said her involvement helped boost the morale of regular employees and raised her business's stature in the eyes of the community. "When communities receive positive benefits," this employers said, "companies generally get a little bit of press out of it and that's going to help your company get recognized. And that's a benefit a business person relates to." Another employer said employer said his summer jobs program participation over the last five years had enabled him to decrease summer turnovers and increase the level of experienced staff. "Thirty-three percent of the young people return," he said. "I have kids still coming back after five years."

Employers in the focus groups said they had enjoyed positive interactions with local program sponsors, such as in Charlotte, where the private sector summer jobs effort is sponsored by the Mayor's Youth Employment Program. A Charlotte employer said: "they've done very well for us and we've enjoyed having them working with us." A representative of Phoenix's private sector summer program said a regular survey of employers and students in the program finds that "by and large, employers are very satisfied." Most companies, he added, "participated at first because somebody told them to. But they were pleasantly surprised with the quality of the youth that they got."

Several Phoenix employers added that the program in their region was "easy to deal with" and included personal contacts. These characteristics, they said, helped them feel very positive about their involvement.

On the basis of their experience, the focus group employers also made specific suggestions for improving the operations of local programs. (See Guidance From the Focus Groups.)

Discussion Highlights: Program Operators

Program operators in the three focus groups agreed that building private sector participation in providing summer jobs for young Americans is a major challenge. Expanding local employers' awareness of, and involvement in, summer jobs programs will require new and more intensive outreach strategies, the program operators said. "It's going to take a more expanded and a more direct marketing campaign," said a Phoenix participant. "Private sector employers are in business to make a profit, so we've got to sell them on how a youth coming into that organization is going to benefit them, perhaps not in the term, but in the long term. Right now, basically what we're doing is a letter campaign. That doesn't really talk to that manager to say, 'This is how this can benefit you.' We're going to have to have someone talking with employers directly to answer questions on the spot about how hiring this youth is going to help their business in the long run."

Another Phoenix participant called this intensified outreach "the challenge of educating business." As a program operator in the Chicago group put it: "The employer community really wants to help in this initiative, but they don't know how – what is expected of them."

The program operators cited several kinds of logistical issues – particularly staffing limitations – that often constrain local programs' capacity to broaden private sector involvement as rapidly as they would like. But they also proposed a variety of steps that program operators can take to increase the effectiveness of their private sector outreach. (See Guidance From the Focus Groups.)

Key Conclusions: Employers and Program Operators

Although the business people and program operators conferred separately, they reached very similar conclusions about what it takes over all for a community to build a successful private sector summer jobs program. Despite their differing vantage points, the program operators and employers both cited the following as key elements needed to create effective local private sector jobs initiatives:

* Obtain the support of the local business community and have well-known business officials play a prominent role in leading the effort.

The participation of high-profile local employers in summer programs clearly has a positive impact in the community, lending credibility and encouraging other businesses to get on board, focus group participants said. Influential business leaders can galvanize the energies and resources of their colleagues by creating a sense of

urgency about the program's importance and demonstrating their own commitment to it. In addition, high-level business leadership makes it easier to gain local media attention for the summer jobs effort. In Charlotte, for example, a major television network outlet commits substantial air time to a summer jobs telethon that immediately arouses wide public interest in the jobs program.

* Set up a formal leadership body representing the business-community partnership.

Successful private sector summer jobs programs derive strength from such a prominent symbol of communitywide commitment, focus group members agreed. In St. Paul, after the Mayor convened a business leadership group, some 300 private sector employers signed up to participate. In Phoenix, where the summer jobs campaign is spearheaded by a group of business leaders called the Greater Phoenix Leadership, about 1600 young people are placed in private sector summer jobs annually. Newspaper executives in the Phoenix business group help develop public awareness by providing news coverage for the program.

* Enlist employer participation through face-to-face personal contacts and follow-ups.

Employers in the focus groups repeatedly pointed to the overriding importance of personal contacts with program operators in encouraging their participation in summer jobs efforts. Several noted that when they were not contacted personally, they were much less likely to get involved. For their part, program operators said they were aware of this outreach problem and were increasing their efforts to make personal connections with employers.

* Send employers only those youth applicants who are job-ready and qualified to meet the employers' specifications.

Employers in the focus groups emphasized that their hiring goal is unambiguous: to bring on only people who can do the work. "If a program is giving me good people with good work habits," said one Charlotte employer, "I will go back to that source every time. If I am getting unqualified people from whatever program it is, then I'm not going to go there, and neither would you if you know that organization is not going to present you with the kinds of people you need." In their focus groups, program operators were in agreement that employers are looking for, at a minimum, dependability, reliability, behaviors and attitudes that show a good work ethic, communications skills, and a commitment to the job. Beyond those characteristics, they noted, ascertaining what specific expectations employers have for every summer job opening is perhaps the most important element of a successful youth employment program.

* Present the summer jobs program as <u>a program for all young people.</u>

It is not productive to characterize youth summer jobs programs as creating employment opportunities for disadvantaged young people, program operators and employers in the focus groups agreed. In the first place, said several program operators, young people do not categorize themselves that way. "They simply come in

looking for a summer job," said one. In the second place, employers neither know nor care whether the young people who come to them for summer work are disadvantaged. "The only thing that matters is whether a young person is qualified to do the work," one employer said.

In the third place, both program operators and employers said, building broad-based participation, including the support of local media, requires a focus on the whole community. All local citizens – parents as well as potential employers – should be able to share the sense that the benefits of summer jobs for youth are communitywide.

* Build ongoing relationships with employers and provide public recognition for those who participate in the summer jobs program.

It is very important to establish links between programs and employers that go beyond an initial solicitation effort, focus group participants stressed. Both program operators and employers said it takes ongoing "relationship building" – starting with personal contacts and continuing with follow-up phone calls, gestures of support, public recognition activities, and year-round communication – to win the commitment of employers to participate year after year, as well as to broaden the network of participants.

Improving Private Sector Summer Jobs Programs:
Guidance From the Focus Groups

Although no two summer jobs initiatives described by focus group participants were exactly alike, most involved some form of public-private collaboration or partnership and private sector job placement – from mayoral programs in Charlotte and Minneapolis supported by the private sector and the local Chamber of Commerce, to the Milwaukee Step Up program run by the local Private Industry Council with the support of the mayor's office, to the Phoenix private-sector-led program called Summer Jobs for Valley Youth, to the state-funded "Hire the Future" program in Illinois, which annually places some 20,000 young people in private sector jobs.

Despite the programs' varying profiles, the program operators and business people familiar with them agreed that increasing private sector visibility in leadership roles helped build summer jobs initiatives into communitywide endeavors. In Phoenix, the business-led Leadership group "galvanized the whole employer process," one program operator said. "They are in a position to take the initiative from A to Z, and if it weren't for their influence, a lot of employers would not have been involved."

The Illinois statewide youth summer program generated significant hiring commitments from a "core group" of major employers, and these firms have become spokespeople for the program to draw other employers into the initiative. The program also has an Employer Council, the director explained, whose members help publicize the effort in corporate newsletters and the media.

In Charlotte, local corporations sponsor the summer program's major recognition luncheon for employers and underwrite the cost of awards for participating students and employers. Program operators also cited the local television station's week-long jobs telethon as a crucial element of their campaign to publicize the summer jobs initiative. "Corporate support is inspiring," one person commented. "It inspires the community as well as those of us who are directly involved in this placement of summer youth."

"Peer influence works best," said a business person in the Phoenix group. "We've found that once companies start to participate, they continue to participate. And to get the new people in their, it's word of mouth."

If an appeal comes from a private sector person the employer respects, "that's what going to impress me, because she knows what she's talking about," said a Chicago employer. This person added that, if contacted by a well-regarded business group, "I'd buy in because of the organizations involved." Charlotte employers said they had agreed to participate in their city's summer youth effort because it was "a good program" that other businesses were active in.

During their discussions, employers and program operators not only identified such key program elements (see Executive Summary) but also targeted factors that can limit the effectiveness of local private sector initiatives. Their comments included practical suggestions for improving the overall quality of these efforts. This report is intended to convey the flavor of the focus group discussions as well as highlight the participants' suggestions.

Outreach to Employers: Make Personal Contacts

Program Operator Perspectives

Program operators said they typically use letters from political or business leaders, radio and television public service announcements, brochures, newspaper stories and advertisements, and community-wide events to promote summer jobs programs and invite business participation. But they agreed that the publicity is not getting through to enough private sector employers enough of the time. "We basically send out letters, we don't talk directly to managers and explain the concept," noted one participant.

Many employers still do not know about the summer programs despite the various publicity efforts, participants said, and new approaches are needed. The comments of many program operators suggested that marketing strategies emphasizing ongoing personal contacts are called for.

Employers need "a little education on what program operators do," said one participant. "Some of them have never been approached before about entry-level positions." Program Operators need to make that direct employer contact and explain that their programs can supply young people who have basic job skills. "It's just getting your foot in the door and selling yourself," one person said. It will take this kind of personal approach in particular, other participants pointed out to broaden private sector jobs efforts to a greater number of small businesses.

Two participants said their outreach activities had been enhanced as a result of links being built between schools and businesses in the School to Work initiative. Now when they call on an employer to enlist jobs, that employer often has a partnership relationship with an individual high school and thus a heightened interest in helping train its young people.

Employer Perspectives

Employers in all three focus groups repeatedly emphasized the importance of personal contacts with program operators in encouraging their participation in summer jobs efforts. Some employers noted that they tended to ignore mail solicitations but would respond to a phone call or visit. Others underscored that point, saying that when they were not contacted personally, they were much less likely to get involved.

Some employers suggested, however, that appropriate mail communications would catch their attention. One said a personal letter – short and to the point, signed by someone who could be called back – would be effective. Others said letters from business peers they respected would influence them most.

Follow-up contacts are equally important, employers said. They would like program operators to contact them after the youth is placed on the job. Several employers said they were contacted only once, during the hiring process. "Nobody called to see how the employee was doing," said one employer. "When we start looking

for workers," said another," the people are calling: 'I want to get this young person a job, I want to get this young person a job.' Once you provide the job, you never hear from them again." The speaker said he had worked with a number of jobs programs with the same result. "They never call me back at the end of the summer to ask whether the young person did well or were there any problems. But I want them to be there for me, in the same way that I contact parents of students I hire."

Ideas for Action

∗ Enlist prominent business figures, including representatives of the media, to help lead the jobs effort, and establish some type of communitywide leadership group.

∗ Encourage media representatives to help plan and participate in the summer jobs program publicity campaign.

∗ Reach out to private sector employers through personal contacts.

∗ Establish relationships with local School to Work programs and make use of their connections with local businesses to build contacts.

∗ If an initial letter about the summer jobs program is sent to employers, make the letter short and to the point, and include the name and phone number of someone who can be called back.

∗ If possible, send the initial letter over the signature of a well-know local business or community leader.

∗ Follow up on initial employer contacts during the summer to inquire how youth employees are faring, and whether employer has any problems that need to be ironed out.

Outreach to Employers: Provide Useful Information

Program Operator Perspectives

In the Charlotte discussion, a speaker said improving the marketing process would speed employers' learning curve about the summer jobs program. "Better communication is training," he said. Another speaker suggested establishing a regional liaison to coordinate communication and interaction "between the private sector and the government sector." Noting that such an expenditure is likely to be viewed as "nice" rather than "needed," the speaker said that "if people would take the time to see what the impact would be, it would change things in the long run. Ultimately, it would improve people's bottom line."

A key element of better communication, program operators said, must be finding ways to dispel employer uncertainties about child-labor law and legal liability issues. "Employers aren't sure what the young people can do legally, and a lot of them are afraid to hire them," said a Chicago participant. "So I've got to do a lot of educating over the phone."

The speaker said that last summer he photocopied current state and federal labor law information and related brochures and handed them out to employers. This year, he said, he plans to invite area employers to attend a conference to try to clear up any legal questions they have about hiring young summer workers.

A Charlotte participant said his program provides information for both employers and students in a brochure that is distributed throughout the city. The first side tells students a little about what a summer job is like and what employers of young people are looking for. The second side gives the employer a sense of "what we want you to do with these young people," the speaker explained. Another person in the Charlotte group suggested holding a communitywide "open forum" in which interested employers could discuss what they are looking for in hiring, and young people could ask questions that are on their minds about the world of work. This would be a way " to start the dialogue," he said.

It was suggested that summer programs establish a web site on the Internet where local employers could look for all the key items of information they need to answer their questions about summer hiring – including the names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses of program people to contact. The site could also enable employers to post job listings and students to search for job possibilities.

A Phoenix program operator said he was also looking for "some way to get the small businesses and the large businesses together and educating them. Just getting a commitment from someone at the top is not enough," he said, echoing comments of others in the three focus groups. "Then when you get down to the Human Resources Department, they're saying, 'I don't know what he's talking about.'" Another speaker proposed that programs convene a conference with human resources people in the private sector to seek their views and suggestions about youth employment efforts.

Employer Perspectives

Employers said it would be helpful to receive targeted information from program operators about current local programs and resources. They suggested such items as listings of organizations and services involved in local summer jobs programs.

Employers said it would also be useful to have a "how to" guide covering the legal, organizational, financial, and educational factors an employer needs to understand in hiring young people for the summer. A Chicago participant noted, as an example, that a large corporation in her region had volunteered to put together a "how-to cookbook" for employers about summer youth employment. The guide covers a range of legal and administrative topics but also offers "tips for employers" about having young people in the workforce.

Program operators also need to recognize differences in types of businesses and to tailor information accordingly, a Chicago employer noted: "You have to steer your pitch, or market it differently, to employers with 250 people or less and those much larger. They are players in the same programs that I am, but their motivation is sometimes different, large and small."

Some employers expressed the same concern as program operators with regard to getting information on the summer program to the appropriate staff within a business organization. Often information does not filter down to the person who will be directly involved with the youth program, they cautioned. They suggested that program representatives ascertain who within a business will be handling summer employment and make contact with that person directly.

Ideas for Action

∗ Establish a regional liaison, familiar with both the public and private sectors in the locality, to help build channels of communication between the summer jobs program and employers.

∗ Develop current informational materials that give employers a picture of community programs and services, particularly summer jobs programs. Tailor information to the size and type of business.

∗ Prepare a "how to" guide that familiarizes employers with the important aspects of hiring young people. The information should answer the questions that are most confusing to employers, such as legal, organizational, and educational concerns.

∗ Create a program web site on the Internet and use it to post useful information and guidance for employers and students. Include names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses of people to contact.

∗ Invite key employer representatives, such as Human Resources officials, to a meeting or conference to discuss youth employment issues and offer their perspectives.

∗ Hold a communitywide forum in which employers can describe their employment expectations and young people can ask questions about the work environment.

Outreach to Employers: Build Relationships

Program Operator Perspectives

Program operators said they viewed "building relationships" with employers as not only a practical necessity but vital to the continuing success of summer jobs initiatives over all. Several participants suggested that, to become a stronger element of youth employment efforts, private sector programs must actually be year-round enterprises with relationship-building at the core.

"There's constant communication and feedback with the employer," one participant explained. "We make contact after the job interview to see what happened and also talk with the person interviewed. If it's not a good referral, the employer will tell you, and I say I am glad you told me because we want to fill this job with a person who meets the qualification. And it's that kind of ironing out that works.

Some program operators said they routinely call every employer to see if a student employee is working out, and fax each firm monthly "to make sure that student's still there." Other participants said they monitor problems that arise on the job until they are resolved; if no resolution is possible, the employee comes back in the program operator for further evaluation and training.

Summer program operators said they strengthen business support by recognizing participating employers through awards functions, press releases, and personal letters of appreciation from political and business leaders. One program sends printouts listing students' employment site and job to their high school counselors, who typically post the lists. These not only provide publicity within the education community for employers who participate in summer hiring but have been a "fantastic motivator" for students to join the program. A speaker suggested publishing an "honor roll" of participating employers in local newspapers, posting it on the program web site, and encouraging local media to do profiles of participating employers and students.

Several participants noted that a key time for the relationship building is after the summer program ends. A Phoenix participant underscored the value in following up with employers in the fall, saying, "Even if you make phone calls after the student is gone, employers really like to have some feedback and the idea that someone at least called."

For all these reasons, getting business people together in informal social settings "to build an exchange with us on an ongoing basis" has become a high priority for Phoenix summer program planners. "It's something that has do be done continuously, and not just when you're gearing up to do a summer campaign," one speaker said. "It's for the long-term building relationships between employers and community-based organizations."

Ideas for Action

* Make building relationships with private sector employers a year-round activity.

* Increase the frequency of personal communications with employers and make follow-up contacts a routine.

* Recognize the participation of employers in as many ways as possible, such as through public events, press releases, awards ceremonies, and program documents. Publish honor roll of participating employers in local papers and on program web site. Highlight stories of individual employers and students.

* Develop strategies for bringing employers and program operators together in informal ways over the course of the year.

Program Logistics: Improve Planning, Make Participation 'Easy'

Program Operator Perspectives

"Get started earlier." That is the primary advice offered by focus group participants for their colleagues who are organizing summer programs. The detailed work of coordinating outreach, screening, and job-placement activities on a schedule that accommodates the needs and requirements of employers and students both cannot be done on a last-minute basis, the program operators said. Program planning should begin in the fall.

"Not only are we starting early with the students, but with the employers as well," said a Chicago participant. "You cannot wait until April, February or March to get them involved and have it be successful." Planning must start early because the time is needed to make employers aware of the summer initiative and get them interested. As someone in the Chicago group put it, "The employer says, 'Don't come to me in May and June asking for jobs from us. Ask in January or February.'"

Many large employers want the names of possible summer job candidates early in the winter, several participants pointed out, because these firms do their own pre-employment testing. Program operators, they said, need to be aware of which firms have this requirement and adapt student recruitment activities accordingly.

Moreover, to budget for summer youth hires many large firms need to make the financial commitment in time to be reflected in their annual fiscal plans. "Everybody has to get this into their budget," said a Charlotte speaker. That means, noted a Chicago participant, that program operators must get the corporate commitment in the fall. And even if the CEO pledges support, a Phoenix speaker said, that commitment has to "roll down" to the manager responsible for hiring in order to be incorporated in the budget plan. Speakers said the program operator must be in contact with this manager directly.

The implication for summer program planners, according to the Chicago speaker, is timely personal involvement in enlisting the company's support as well as follow-ups to assure that all the relevant corporate officials are in the loop.

"We found that some of the employers were accepting applications for jobs as early as January and making selections of the employees as early as March," said a Charlotte participant. "So if we start in April we're at a loss." Another speaker added, "I just don't think you can start too early for this. We're talking this year about starting in January or February, and I think we could even start earlier because it's not an easy process and the more time we can devote to it, the better." Another participant added that April is too late because that puts youth programs in competition with college students seeking summer employment.

One program operator offered a possible way to deal with employers' reluctance to get involved in youth hiring because of their uncertainty about legal liability issues. Working with a small group of employers involved in school-to-work activities, his

program assumes the workers' compensation insurance costs of under-age students who are hired in conjunction with career-related studies at their school. The participating employers in return agree to pay the students' wages. Employer participation in this project has increased "tremendously," the speaker said.

To ease students' application process, a program operator in the Chicago group said he had combined federal, state, and local application forms into one simple, two-sided form that all summer job applicants could quickly complete.

Employer Perspectives

The employers emphasized that program operators need to do everything possible to "make it easy" for employers to get involved. That means, they said, not only allaying employer concerns about liability and labor-law issues, but making sure there is no entangling paperwork and orchestrating a smooth interview process for employers with summer job candidates.

Employers said, for example, that they often felt rushed by program operators in scheduling interviews with summer job applicants. They said better communication and more personal contacts early in the process would facilitate employer involvement. Several pointed to management of the summer jobs timetable as a factor that needs to be addressed.

Ideas for Action

* Get started earlier! Begin preparations in the fall for the following summer.

* Reorganize the program schedule to recognize that making contacts with businesses must begin in the fall and that business may make budget decisions affecting summer employment before the first of the year.

* Find out who is responsible for summer hiring and establish direct contact with the person, after following protocol to introduce program to CEO or other officer first.

* Ascertain employers' advance-planning needs and follow through to meet their timetables.

* Ascertain whether business contacts are interested in receiving program information by e-mail and, if so, make use of it.

* Begin the screening and matching process earlier.

* In effect, turn the summer jobs program into a year-round program.

* Find ways to make it "easy" for employers to agree to participate.

Program Logistics: Provide Work-Ready Job Candidates

Program Operator Perspectives

Program operators said they recognize that their programs' credibility with employers depends on the quality of the job candidates they refer. As one Chicago participant stated, "Once an employer gets alienated, it's very difficult to get that employer back."

"Coming to work on time, being able to take supervision, coming to work consistently, knowing the basics in terms of communication skills -- that's what employers say they want more than anything from young people as well as adults," noted a member of the Phoenix focus group. "Employers are looking for attitude, the ability to listen and the willingness to learn," said someone in the Charlotte group. "That's very important and probably included in the work ethic we're talking about."

In addition to these basic work-readiness qualities, however, employers are often seeking specific technical skills for particular jobs, the participants agreed. A program operator's failure to achieve "clarity" about the specifics, they warned, can mean a poor experience for young people and employers both, as well as a serious loss of credibility for the summer program itself. Said one person: "We try to work together with the employer so we are all on the same page."

For these reasons, focus group participants indicated they are as thorough as time will allow with youth screening and matching activities. "We do pre-assessments, academic testing, looking at the pre-employment levels -- whether someone needs specialized or job-readiness training. All those are prerequisites that we all do," a Phoenix participant said. "Clarity is always the aim in job referrals because we always want to impress the employers. We want to send the right people and make sure we make the right connections, because we don't want to lose a good contact."

In all three focus groups, program operators reported problems in attempting to place youth who are ages 14-15. But participants also noted that some employers are willing to hire younger workers and train them. An employer should be asked the question, they recommended. "You really have to divide employers by age," one person explained," so you know those who need 18 and up and those who can take someone younger."

The program operators repeatedly expressed frustration at the inadequate preparation of young people to enter the employment world -- a frustration the employers also voiced in their groups. Because they in effect "vouch" for youth job candidates with employers, the program operators said, they often must take more responsibility for pre-employment "education" of young people than they would like. They said there needs to be better coordination between schools and workforce development professionals to improve students' in-school preparation for the world of work.

Today, there are wide variations in the levels of cooperation and collaboration between program operators and local schools, participants said. Speakers from Charlotte, Phoenix, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis reported having good collaborative relationships with schools. Milwaukee schools, for example, provide office space for summer program staff and permit staff to conduct in-school training workshops and student registration. But other program operators said schools do not seem interested in preparation for work and are not welcoming to summer program people. Several people urged that DOL use its influence through the School to Work program to help lower these barriers.

One successful program collaboration was described by a Phoenix speaker, who coordinates a city-funded work-study program bridging academics and employment. In this program, high-school juniors and seniors who have approval from their academic counselors are placed in summer jobs related to the interests they express. They receive academic credit for their work upon successful completion of the program. The assessment requirements "maintain interest and build job skills," the speaker said. "They're doing something that challenges them and they're moving up. We can't hold them."

Employer Perspectives

The employers emphasized that their primary interests in summer jobs programs – just as in their regular hiring – are (1) finding qualified workers and (2) assuring worker performance. Their top priority, employers said, is to employ only "people who can do the work."

All employers attending the three focus groups cited a growing need for workers, especially in the summer months and during holiday periods. "Everybody's going to be scrambling for this commodity called 'people,'" said a Phoenix employer. "So these programs create an awareness and those that are being involved in it are going to have some people. And the others, I don't know where they're going to get them from."

But one employer captured the general sense of all in the focus groups that employers still cannot afford to fill empty positions with young people who are not job-ready: "Things are very hectic in our office, we barely keep our heads above water, and we don't have the time to train," she said. "So we would like these people to come in with some understanding of work."

The employers mirrored the view of program operators that young people in general are ill-prepared for the workplace. Employers in all three focus groups said youths' unreadiness for employment was a serious problem. Saying schools should be equipping students with work-related skills, many were sharply critical of their frequent failure to do so. "Workplace skills ought to be a requirement before you could even graduate from high school," said a Charlotte speaker. "That's how strongly I feel about it."

A Phoenix employer noted that, in his work with local Chamber of Commerce education programs, he sought to give school presentations about career possibilities. "But we were stopped dead in our tracks in every one of the high schools," he said.

"None of them would allow us in because their mandate is, students have to go to the university." He concluded: "Our biggest obstacle in the marketing process is that you send information to the schools and it goes no further. How you can change it, I'm not sure. But it's going to have to be changed if we're going to bring resolution to this issue."

On the other hand, employers in the focus groups said they felt it was important to provide young people with a clearer understanding of what work is all about, and the varied ways an individual's skills come into play in job tasks. These employers said they see their involvement with youth as a role they play in workforce development.

"This may sound corny, but it is the right thing to do," one employer said. She and other employers cited the importance of helping train young people, providing a "solid foundation" of workplace experience, skilled supervision, and "creating someone who may come back to us." In describing his company's attention to youth workers, one employer said, "Treat your employees the way you want them to treat your customers."

A Chicago employer suggested, however, that public sector representatives sometimes seem not to respect the legitimacy of the employer's expectations. "I don't think they realize how much employers are bringing to the table when they get involved in this," the speaker said. "It's very hard sometimes to work with young people who have limited skills and haven't worked before. It is hard. We have to recognize that."

But in the Phoenix group, a speaker noted that the Phoenix summer jobs program "encourages employers not to modify their job requirements just so they can hire a 16-year-old, for example, and most don't. They have legitimate needs." When those needs are met in hiring, he suggested, it is good news for the summer initiative. A major Phoenix employer that hired 23 students in 1996, he noted, wrote to the program last year to say his company could not hire any more students because it was employing all 23 from the previous summer.

Several employers suggested developing a work-readiness training program for young people that would be more intensive than the short orientation program frequently offered by summer job programs. They said such an effort could be undertaken most effectively in collaboration with schools.

Ideas for Action

∗ Screen job candidates carefully to assure that they meet basic workplace requirements.

∗ Be sure to ascertain the employer's specific skill requirements for a particular job and match only a candidate with the appropriate skill levels.

∗ Look for ways to improve levels of cooperation with schools in preparing young people for the workplace.

∗ Transform the youth orientation program into a more intensive work-preparation training activity.

Program Logistics: Involve Employers in Other Ways

Program Operator Perspectives

By providing jobs, businesses play the most important role possible in supporting youth summer employment efforts, program operators agreed. But they noted that business assistance can also take other very helpful forms. A Charlotte speaker suggested creating a speaker's bureau of private sector officials who can be called upon to talk to young people at schools and community agencies about workplace skills, career possibilities, and the nature of their industry.

A Phoenix participant noted that employers can also play a more significant role in youth development by providing job-skills workshops for young people.

This speaker pointed as well to the powerfully positive effect that on-the-job supervision can have on young workers. He said his program's most successful job placements have occurred when the employer assigned a mentor to work directly with the young worker. Such a person, he said, does not have to be physically nearby in the workplace but simply responsible for checking with the young person regularly to see how he or she is doing – "someone who can make a connection with that youth."

Employers can also benefit themselves and the summer program by participating in local job fairs, several program operators said. The fairs, which can be sponsored by the program or a communitywide partnership, provide a cost-effective, time-limited way to draw a large number of young people together so employers can advertise their openings and interview candidates.

Employer Perspectives

Two Charlotte employers said their companies provide a variety of free workshops to help area young people acquire the skills they need, from resume-writing and interviewing skills, to computer training. One employer noted: "I think as employers or citizens of the community that we don't hold ourselves accountable enough to help the youth make the next step into workforce. So often, employers say to me, 'If that person doesn't know how to dress before they come to interview, why would I even want to hire them.' Well, that person doesn't know because no one has ever taken the time to teach them."

Despite their comments about students' lack of work skills, a number of employers expressed a strong sense of responsibility for making sure that those who are hired have a positive work experience. They urge other employers to establish the mentoring, supervision, and avenues for on-the-job achievement that inexperienced young people especially need. "Some employers care, and some just don't," said one employer in describing his company's induction program for summer workers. "But I have kinds still coming back after five years."

Several employers said it was particularly important to them to mentor young workers on the job because they view mentoring as a vital factor in the overall development of youth. A Chicago employer said he was determined "to make sure that

we provide these individuals with a solid foundation about work ethics as well as mentoring." He added, "I'm making sure that we surround the individuals with great supervisors and continue to teach them."

Employers need to be sensitive to factors of age, maturity, and work capabilities in guiding young people, the business people said, and some work is not appropriate for teenagers. "We get so involved in our day-to-day things that sometimes we forget," said a Charlotte speaker. "We take so much for granted that someone else doesn't understand, if it's our business."

To strengthen the mentoring aspect, a Chicago employer suggested that the private sector summer program provide teachers or counselors who could "pitch in" at the work site with guidance and supervision for summer workers. Such a practice would assist youth and help employers, he said.

Many employers also noted that they had extended their roles to include career counseling and encouraging young people to stay in school. Over all, employers felt that they can and should seek to influence young people to continue their education, and can encourage that by offering additional part-time work during the school year or assuring return employment in the future. A Phoenix participant cited an example of a construction company that hired a high-school junior, who learned fast and well under the guidance of a supervisor. He told the supervisor he wasn't going back to school but wanted to work full time. But the supervisor responded that if he finished high school he would be guaranteed a job.

One employer noted the opposite problem: that some employers are reluctant to hire young people just for the summer because they need year-round employees. But these employers, he said, can be shown that a good summer employee may also be able to continue working on a part-time basis.

Employers in the Chicago and Phoenix groups said they had taken a further step to provide oversight: They made it a point to involve parents in their summer employment program. "I let youth know I am involving their parents," said one employer. "That keeps them coming and keeps me knowing I've got some support over here." A Minnesota employer commented: "I like the parent side. We do the same thing, but more on a positive note. We call counselors and teachers on negative stuff, but it's a positive tie with the parent. If the student brings in his parent for a tour, to explain his job and give the parent an opportunity to see the manufacturing facility and what his role is, we have a little perk for that student – tickets to a ball game."

In Phoenix, two employers said their student workers are given a list of expectations, and parents have to sign it with them. A Chicago employer noted that he routinely calls parents to let them know what their child is doing in the workplace.

Citing the logistical difficulties, particularly for small businesses, in recruiting and interviewing, many employers joined with program operators in calling job fairs a successful recruitment device. The job fairs draw large numbers of young people, business representatives said, and they were able to talk with them about their plans and provide job-skills counseling as well as do interviews. A Charlotte employer cited

the Mayor's Youth Fair at city hall as cost-effective for area employers, and also for young people, who did not have to travel long distances to speak with each employer.

A private sector employment contractor in the Chicago focus group held an information day at its downtown offices. Young people were guided through interview, application, and employment skills and then heard a presentation from one of the region's largest employers of young summer workers, a large fairground. Interested students were to return the next day to be bused out to the facility for interviews, the contractor said. But the plan was for a busload of 30, and 130 showed up, so about half the students had to be interviewed by phone, the contractor said. In the end, though, 75 young people were hired.

Ideas for Action

∗ Employers can support the summer jobs program in a variety of ways above and beyond providing job opportunities. Enlist employer involvement in:

   -- Promoting and participating in **job fairs**.

   -- Developing and joining a **speakers bureau**. The roster would feature local business representatives who can be called on by schools and community agencies to give presentations or workshops about preparing for the workplace and employment expectations in their type of business.

   -- Sponsoring **skill-training programs** for young people.

   -- **Speaking to other business people** about their experience with the summer youth employment program.

∗ Find ways to help employers understand how on-the-job mentoring, supervision, and guidance can enhance the summer employment experience for them as well as the young people they hire. (This could be part of the how-to guide for employers proposed above.)

∗ Provide the services of a teacher or guidance counselor who can assist in the workplace mentoring of summer employees.

Program Logistics: Ongoing Issues

1) Staffing. Program operators in Charlotte and Phoenix cited limitations in their summer programs' staffing levels as a restriction on the scope of their activities. "Having enough people to facilitate the workshops, the pre-employability training for the private sector program" is a continuing problem, said a Charlotte speaker. In years when the program had the staff, she said, "we required that the youth come to the workshops before we would make a referral. But due to staffing, we haven't had the opportunity to do the type of group push that we had in the past." Another Charlotte participant described his program as "short on staffing and getting the right people to already be prepared to do the kind of things we need done in a short amount of time."

"We're caught between a rock and a hard place because our summer program is temporary staff," said a Phoenix person. "We may play certain roles in cross-training and as facilitators overseeing the summer program, but we're not necessarily able to work with the youth after the summer because we're responsible for other programs. These types of projects need to be ongoing."

2) Transportation. Employers and program operators both cited lack of public transportation to and from workplaces as a major barrier to hiring young people. "We could place so may more students if we had better transportation," said one program operator. "That's a big problem for me in Charlotte. It just doesn't seem the transportation is where the work is."

A Charlotte employer noted that, because his business is located outside the city, the limited public transportation makes the work site especially inaccessible to urban youth. The company managers discussed the possibilities of changes in bus schedules to remedy this problem, but bus officials did not respond.

Transportation is an issue for a lot of these young people in trying to get them from one side of town to the other, where the opportunity is," agreed a Phoenix employer. He and other employers in the three focus groups said they did not have the resources to solve that problem themselves.

Program Logistics: Improvements SDAs Can Make

1) Address Legal Liability. SDAs can help open up more private sector employment possibilities by taking action to allay employer fears about legal liability.

2) Strengthen Employer Relationships. SDAs can improve and strengthen the relationship they have developed with the employer community and find out what employers' needs are in relation to youth employment.

3) Help Forge School to Work Links. Both employers and program operators said local schools and the employer community must foster a relationship to improve in-school preparation of students for employment. Both groups expressed significant frustration at the resistance of many schools to respond academically to the need for a better student transition from school to workplace.

4) Reduce Paperwork. Program operators were urged to reduce paperwork requirements.

Program Logistics: How DOL Can Help

1) Get Program Guidance Out Early. Program operators pointed out that they frequently get information and visits from DOL staff too late to be of assistance in program planning.

2) Intensify Marketing and Promotion. DOL can raise the nationwide visibility of the Private Sector Summer Jobs Program by expanding national marketing and outreach efforts to employers and the media.

3) Stress the Importance of In-School Preparation. Program operators urged DOL to continue efforts to strengthen the School to Work Initiative. As one program operator advised, DOL should "get with the educational system and tell them, this is the information we got from the employer community. You need to redesign your curricula in order to meet these needs."

4) Hold More Forums. Employers and program operators both said they found the focus group discussions useful. They encouraged DOL to sponsor additional conferences, discussions, and forums bringing training professionals, business people, and program specialists interested in youth together to confer and exchange information on youth employment.